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ABSTRACT

In response to Virginia's House Joint Resolution 436, the State's Department of Education recommends that: (1) the present entrance age be maintained until 1995, when voluntary programs for at-risk 4-year-olds become available; (2) the discretionary period (October 31-December 31) be discontinued when voluntary programs for at-risk 4-year-olds become available; (3) all kindergarten programs become developmental programs that recognize varying patterns and rates of individual development; and (4) junior kindergarten and transitional first grade programs be replaced in the next 5 years with developmental kindergarten programs. This report supports these recommendations. The report reviews the history of entrance age studies, considers issues related to present entrance age practices, and explores implications of these practices. (RH)

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REPORT OF THE
BOARD OF EDUCATION ON

The Efficacy and Appropriateness of the Commonwealth's Present Entrance Age Requirements for Kindergarten Attendance

TO THE GOVERNOR AND
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA

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COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
RICHMOND
1990

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RESPONSE TO HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 436

History of Entrance Age Studies

The entrance age for kindergarten in Virginia has been addressed four times in the last 17 years. Prior to 1973 children could enter school if they reached their fifth birthday on or before September 30. Then, in order to make Virginia law conform to that in neighboring states and to provide rich experiences for children at an earlier age, the law was changed to allow children who were five by December 31 to enter school. Decision makers in 1972 were responding to research showing that children learned more easily and quickly in the early years than at any other time of life. Allowing children to come to school three months earlier was an attempt to provide rich educational experiences for them as early as possible. In 1978 a joint subcommittee of the General Assembly studied several aspects of kindergarten, including entrance age. This subcommittee recommended that no change be made in the entrance age at that time.

Increasing demands for educational reform which included more attention to basic skills, the mainstreaming of handicapped children into regular classrooms, and the downward thrust of the first-grade curriculum caused many teachers and other school division personnel to support an increase in the kindergarten entrance age. Children who had traditionally done well in kindergarten programs that allowed them to explore their environment, interact with materials and people, and progress at their own rate were no longer succeeding with the curriculum. Kindergarten teachers who had previously believed that their programs should be child-centered began to feel that they must have all children complete the readiness material traditionally reserved for the beginning of first grade by the end of the kindergarten year. The dichotomy between what teachers believed was good for children and what they felt compelled to teach put a strain on both teachers and children. To protect children from academic failure and early burn-out resulting from an inappropriate academic curriculum, teachers and school administrators believed that raising the entrance age for children who were not ready for school academically or developmentally would solve the problem. In 1985, the entrance age was rolled back to September 30 effective in 1988 in response to the concerns of educators; however, parents of children born after September 30 and on or before December 31 could petition the division superintendent for enrollment in kindergarten.

Issues Related to Present Entrance Age

The age of children presently entering Virginia's kindergartens ranges from four years eight months to six years eleven months of age. This wide range in entrance ages has resulted from two sections of the Code of Virginia. First, Section 22.1-199 of the Code of Virginia states that parents of children having their fifth birthdays between October 1 and December 31 may petition the school division in which they reside for early admission into kindergarten. Parents generally make this request when they believe that their children are ready for the kindergarten program or when they need affordable child care while they work. Section 22.1-256 of the Code of Virginia allows parents to wait until their children are six years of age before enrolling them in school. As a result, some children enter school when they are almost seven years old. Some parents choose to wait because they feel that their children are not ready for the academic demands of the kindergarten curriculum. Other parents believe that their children are too immature at age five for kindergarten and will be leaders in the class if they begin kindergarten at an older age.

In a review of educational research from 1930 to 1970 Beattie (1970, p.10) concluded that "the majority of the research relating to entrance age of students as it relates to later school achievement indicated that children who entered school at an early age had more academic problems than later entrants." However, Hebbeler (1981, p. 11) said that, "Although chronological age does play a role in children's academic achievement, age explains only a small fraction of the variation among children entering school." Gold (1987), Shepard and Smith (1986), and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (1987) have also reported that several studies have shown that the differences attributable to age are small and disappear with time, perhaps by the third grade. While studies have suggested that older children tended to perform better academically than younger children, Langer et al. (1984) believed that an age-of-entrance change would not solve the problem of some children being "behind grade level standards" because even in the groups where the mean age of the children was higher the younger males were still behind. Shepard and Smith (1986) go on to point out that as the entrance age is increased, older children are more able to adapt to the academic demands of the kindergarten curriculum, thus making younger children appear to be further behind.

Research suggests that entry age is just one small predictor of children's school success (Peck, McCaig, & Sapp, 1988). According to Tom Schultz of the National Association of State Boards of Education (Ed Line, August, 1989), "Raising the entry age is a response to concern for higher standards in outcome and

achievement. But it is only a temporary solution. It does not directly address the problem of finding better ways to prepare children for a successful school career." Thirty other states now require children to be five years old by September 30 or earlier (Peck et al., 1988).

In 1985 the Department of Education offered school divisions the opportunity to provide developmental kindergartens or to organize transitional programs that give children an extra year to develop or mature. Junior kindergartens and transitional first grades are examples of transitional programs. Junior kindergartens were provided by 25 divisions for children who were eligible by law to attend kindergarten but whose standardized assessment scores indicated that they were either socially or emotionally unready for kindergarten or were academically unready for the kindergarten curriculum. Transitional first-grade programs were offered by 32 other school divisions to children who had experienced difficulty in kindergarten, scored poorly on readiness tests, and needed an extra year to mature according to the judgment of teachers.

According to national studies on kindergarten retention reviewed by Gredler (1984) and Shepard (1989) and the preliminary study of the effectiveness of junior kindergarten and transitional first-grade programs, these organizational patterns are ineffective. "Although a year older than their new grade peers, transition children perform no better academically than transition-eligible children who went directly on to first grade. The finding of no difference or no benefit is true whether children were placed on the basis of pre-academic problems or developmental immaturity" (Shepard, 1989, p. 75).

Further complicating the present entrance-age law is the practice by some school divisions of admitting <u>all</u> tested students whose birthdays fall after September 30 and before January 1. Although this practice is based on a belief that as many children as possible need to participate in early learning experiences, it has the effect of making the date of entrance December 31 for that division. Movement by a child from one division to another or to another state can cause placement difficulties because a receiving school division may test and find that a child is ineligible by their standards to enter kindergarten.

Implications of Present Practices

Parents, teachers, and citizens are concerned that kindergarten programs have focused recently on a narrow range of academic skills and have produced pressures on children, parents, and teachers that are counterproductive for future learning and living. Many ills have sprung from a poorly-conceived curriculum and inappropriate methods of instruction. The more serious problems are the need to test to find those children who are unready for a set academic program, to add transitional grades before or after the kindergarten year so that children can cope with pressures that are not found in an appropriate program, and the need to

experiment with the kindergarten entrance age so that multiple missions of child care, early stimulation for at-risk students, and stringent academic preparations for first grade can be served in the kindergarten year.

According to Barbara Willer, spokesperson for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the primary issue to be addressed in kindergarten education is the curricula. Peck et al.(1988) have also pointed to the need to provide a more flexible curriculum, "because all children succeed when the curriculum is appropriate" (p.10). Typically kindergarteners are eager, active learners who construct knowledge about the physical and social world by interacting with people and real objects. The programs that serve these children must be designed to provide a variety of experiences to foster their development and lay a foundation to encourage a disposition to learn.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the present entrance age be maintained until 1995 when voluntary programs for at-risk four-year-olds become available.

It is recommended that the discretionary period October 1 to December 31, be discontinued when voluntary programs for at-risk four-year-olds become available in 1995.

It is recommended that all kindergarten programs become developmental programs that recognize varying patterns and rates of individual development.

It is recommended that junior kindergarten and transitional first-grade programs be replaced in the next five years with developmental kindergarten programs.

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